



Friends, Brothers and Informants: Fieldwork Memoirs of Banaras

Nita Kumar

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"Why was Banaras such a mystery to me when I arrived in 1981? Was it ironically because I was an Indian and expected to have a privileged insight into it?"

In this unusually personal, evocative account of her fieldwork experiences, Kumar tackles the dilemma of how a Western-trained Indian intellectual adapts to the field and builds deeply affecting relationships with strangers. She discloses what it is like to be a native researching her own culture, offering her fieldwork memoirs in all their spontaneity and candor.

We see Banaras through her eyes when she first arrives: throngs of people, cramped and dark lodgings, unappetizing food, mischievous monkeys, and almost overwhelming filth. But as she establishes friendships, we are treated to her discoveries not only about the city and its people, but also about her place in this society.

The familiar problems that face most anthropologists conducting fieldwork—of Self versus Other, objectivity versus bias, familiar circumstances versus new and dismaying ones—are given a surprising and complex dimension. Through a narration of her own experiences, the author demonstrates how personal locations—habits, preferences, expectations deriving from childhood memories, and areas of ignorance—impose themselves on the process of selection, observation, and interpretation in research.

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